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ABSTRACT

There are many behaviors that young children must deal with, one of these being aggression. One strategy teachers can use to help children deal with aggressive behavior is reading children's stories with conflict themes. Stories encourage children's participation and discussion, enabling them to better communicate their often confusing emotions. Research strongly suggests that aggression is environmentally transmitted. In regards to the four-year-old, aggression is normal, healthy behavior that arises as a need to define "self" in relation to others. Contains a bibliography of 15 recommended children's books with conflict themes and 12 references. (Author)

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Aggression: using children's stories with conflict themes to help four-year-olds deal with aggressive behaviors in the classroom.

ROSEANN PAPPAS
FALL, 1997

ABSTRACT

There are many behaviors that young children must deal with; one of these being aggression. One strategy teachers can use to help children deal with aggressive behavior is reading children's stories with conflict themes. Stories encourage children's participation and discussion, using language, a skill necessary for young children enabling them to better communicate their very often, very confusing,emotions. Research strongly suggests that aggression is environmentally tranmitted.In regards to the four-year-old, aggression is normal, healthy behavior, a behavior that arises as a need to define "self" in relation to others.

Four-year-old Joseph walks over to where Ciera has just finished building a house at the Lego table. Joseph deliberatley knocks it down, making Ciera cry. Brian is playing at the water table when another child comes over to play. Brian, without speaking, causes him to fall against a chair. The child walks away, without retaliation. Rachel is playing in the housekeeping area, engrossed in her role as "mother" when Nisreen walks over and asks if she could play too. Rachel angrily shouts, "No, I don't want you to play here". Nisreen's feelings are badly hurt.

This is my second year working as an assistant teacher in a nursery school and these are just some of the many behaviors I observe in the classroom. Behaviors, such as the ones described, cause me to wonder why children act-out aggressively and what, as teachers, we can do to help facilitate children's handling of aggression in the classroom.

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Defining aggression

It is suggested that aggression has many meanings; depending on for who or for what aggression is being described, it comes under many behaviors. Aggression, is a behavior, that is not uniformly defined (Parens, 1993, p. 5). To begin, aggression is hurtful, hostile and angry behavior. It can cause personal injury or injury to another. It can be deliberate or quite accidental (Jersild, 1968). Aggression can cause mental (emotional) injury, e.g. teasing, taunting and bullying. Aggression can cause destruction of property (Bandura, 1973). Aggression is "troublesome behavior to oneself and others". Aggression can be a "call of distress" (Parens, 1993, p. 6). One study, Schwartz, Dodge, Petitt and Bates, examines young children who are "victims of aggression", e.g. children who are prone to displaying physical hostility towards others. The study also examines "non-victimized aggressors" e.g. children described as using aggression as a goal-oriented means of achieving group dominance or acquiring objects (1997, p. 665). Young boys were the target of this and another study by Turner, (1991). Both studies strongly suggest that boys seem more overtly (physically) aggressive than are girls. Girls are described as being more psychologically aggressive or what is called covert aggression (Jersild, 1986).

Consider Jessica, who has a strong personality; bossy, domineering. Jessica has latched on to Annie who is a more timid and shy child. As the year progresses, Annie becomes

more confident and outgoing and makes new attachments; much to the displeasure of Jessica. Annie now finds herself in "constant conflict" with Jessica because Annie is no longer dependant on Jessica. Jessica can no longer dominate Annie to achieve a goal of her own. Annie no longer needs to be in the company of Jessica in order to make new acquaintances. In this case, an increase in conflicts is connected with an improvement in the child's (Annies) social relationships within the group as a whole (Jersild, 1968, p. 257).

It is from my observations, that aggressive behavior is neither a boy or girl thing. Aggressive behavior is equally present in both sexes. What I found to be evident is that boys are more physically aggressive, not necessarily in a harmful way, while girls are more manipulative, e.g. using language, body language, as in, facial expressions. Girls might appear to be the more "gentler" aggressors; but they may certainly display behaviors that are just as harmful as physically hurtful behaviors and hurt another child's feelings or attack another child's self-esteem.

Aggression is not always a bad thing

Aggression is also described as "normal and healthy"... a sign of healthy enterprise" (Jersild, 1986, p. 256). Healthy aggression is described as a child's "pressured efforts to make something happen" (Parens, 1993, p.7). For example: Joseph is in the block area constructing a tall tower. He begins to wave his arms excitedly and shouts to the other children nearby, " I'm building my tower. Don't

touch my tower". Is Joseph displaying hurtful behavior? Is he showing anger? No, he is just protecting his very-well-thought-out masterpiece. Joseph is demonstrating a healthy drive (emotion) for accomplishing a task on his own (p.7). What might appear to be hostile or angry behavior, is Joseph saving himself from hurt (should someone knock down his tower) while wanting to be recognized for what he mastered. The teacher seeing this could go over to Joseph and praise him for a job well done and at the same time, reassure him that the other children will be careful not to knock down his tower.

It is through play that the teacher can observe children demonstrate aggressive behaviors in many ways.

> Adults need to know just how hard children are struggling with their aggressive impulses... monsters, super heroes, good guys, bad guys and (gals) and the latching on to fairy tales and folk heroes at 5. Such play is not deviant and prohibiting it deprives children of the opportunity to deal with such issues as good, bad, power and weakness, the management of aggression and depenence, life-long issues for all of us (Curry & Arnaud, 1995, p. 6).

The teacher should encourage a variety of play themes, so long as they are appropriate for the child's social development. The teacher, however, might want to be aware of the child who "is" rather than pretends "to be" the aggressor, (e.g. biting monster or the unleashed tornado) and frightens other children he is playing with. Some children can't distinquish between real an pretend (Curry and Arnaud, 1995, p. 7).

Children's social domain

There is a description of aggression specifically relating to early childhood.

> Aggression emerges from children's strong developmental push to initiate and maintain relationships with other children. Aggression is intentional.It often results in physical or mental injury. It can be accidental, instrumental or even hostile. Aggression is not to be confused with assertion; behavior through which a child maintains and defends one's rights (Jewett, 1992, p. 2).

What about children's relationships? From the day we are born, social interaction begins. The infant responds to it's mother, siblings and other family members. As the child grows, his social sphere widens to include extended family, community, and then school. By the age of four, a child has acquired quite a bit of "social experience"; this being necessary for normal, healthy development in young children (Edwards, 1986, p. 3).

> The years from 2 to 6 are a time of rapid change in the development of social and moral knowledge. How we help young children learn about and make sense of their social world is critical to their well-being. Young children use interaction to understand who people are, why they behave the way they do and to gain a sense of competence and control (p. 3).

I observe children in my classroom "struggle" with and "struggle" through many peer interactions. I watch the children communicate, miscommunicate, build, destroy, share help and resist.The children do all of these things with

so many emotions of their own while having to deal with the emotions of others. This has to be overwhelming for a four-year-old to process, therefore, outbursts of aggressive behaviors occur.

Early parental relationships

There are two studies, (Turner, 1991) and (Kemple, 1991), whose findings show that the child who has experienced, "positive parental attachment" will be more successful at being accepted by one's peers. It is believed that the positive attachment provides the child with a "secure base"; one where the parent/caregiver is sensitive to and responsive to the child's emotional needs. "The attachment figure provides a secure base from which to explore... promoting opportunities to master new experiences, leading to greater self-confidence and competence" (Turner, 1991, p. 1476).

It is more than likely that the teacher is not going to know the child's home history; but as the teacher, one could become the "secure base" offering skills that are needed for positive social interactions and wherever possible, to lessen hostile, aggressive behaviors. Kemple suggests that "cooperation and aggression have been found to forecast whether children become liked or disliked by classmates as the school year progresses (1991, p. 49).

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What triggers aggression

Much of the research on aggression points to the belief that aggression is a "learned behavior" (Bandura, 1973; Parens, 1993; Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1992; Parry, 1993). Bandura, as part of a social learning theory, states that aggression is a learned conduct as a result of the environment. It is behavior that can be "guided and regulated". His is a belief that a particular behavior e.g. aggression is culturally transmitted and if one can control the environment, one can cause desireable results (1973, p. 44). This as opposed to Freud (1950) who believed that aggression was "instinctual" and any attempt to quell its drive would be to no avail (p. 13).

> Hostile, destructive behavior (aggression) is not present at birth. What is present at birth is the mechanism for its production(generation) or mobilization. What activates the mechanism and generates hostile destructiveness...is the experience of excessive unpleasure, (as in pain or distress) (Parens, 1993, p. 7).

Children today are exposed to violence, sometimes on a daily basis. There is violence at home. school, T.V. and very often, play e.g. video games. Children need to be encouraged to replace aggressive behavior with "socially productive alternatives" (Jewett, 1992, p. 3). Children need to know that they have the power to make the choice not to choose violence. They need to be strong, e.g. "standing up for one's own rights" and they need to feel good about themselves (Parry, p. 14, 1993).

It is to be interpreted that the teacher can create, (not control) the classroom environment; one which would enable children to learn skills (e.g. language) to foster positive peer interactions. The goal would be to decrease the occurrences of aggressive behaviors, particularly, the hostile, hurtful behaviors. "What most people need is not the insight that they are behaving inadequately, but the means to learn a more successful way of behaving"(Bandura, 1973, p. 253).

Using children's books

As part of a developmentally appropriate program for four-year-olds, reading children's books with conflict themes, can help teach children to make sense of and deal with aggressive behavior; that of their own and that which are encountered with peers.

Reading children's books, with conflict themes, can elicit children's ideas about how conflict situations can be resolved (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1992, p. 11). There are many conflict situations that children encounter in the classroom; encounters that particularly cause aggressive behavior. To name a few, there is the sharing problem, the taking turns problem, the bossy child who get a little "physically rough" with another child. There's the child who turns a peaceful or cooperative play activity into the loud sometimes, physical and competitive activity.

Sometimes, in young children, being competitive, is simply a show of "power" (Schwartz, Dodge, Petitt & Bates, 1997).

It has been my experience that following a story that has been read, e.g. a sharing story, children will incorporate a sharing situation into their play, mimicking the one from the story. The situation becomes real for the child and the child is able to make sense of it, using his own words and actions. As mentioned earlier in the (Parry, 1993) article, in order for children to be better able to handle violence (aggressive behaviors) one of the skills they need to develop is language. When a child has learned to master good communication skills, interactions with one's peers become pleasing and successful experiences. It is on these successful experiences that children "build" on their knowledge in order that they develop socially acceptable ways to handle conflict (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1992).

When children are read too, the experience can offer them time to think about a situation. It has been my experience that when children are read a story, there is always the opportunity for discussion. When young children are involved in conflict situations, those feelings of anger and frustration can be very difficult, particularly for the four-year-old to verbalize.

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Choosing books and some approaches to take

There are two books which are part of a series, by Elizabeth Crary, I Want It (1982) and I Can't Wait (1982), the first dealing with a sharing issue and the other, a taking-turns issue. These books would be most helpful in demonstrating to the children, conflict situations that do arise in the classroom and allowing the children and teacher to engage in discussion. The books are designed to be read straight through, (traditional) or can be read to fit a situation, e.g. sharing, with alternatives that alter the course of the story. The books are designed to allow the child to respond to a situation. For example: Amy and Megan want to play with the same truck. How will they do this? Some alternatives are: grab it, ask for it, wait for it, threaten or get help. The children can talk about the situation and the teacher can direct them to choose the appropriate response and ask the children why something is acceptable or unacceptable.

It is important for the teacher and children to discuss the feelings of the books characters. Questions to ask: "How do you think Megan feels when Amy grabbed the truck"? "How would that make you feel?" This is a good opportunity for the teacher to help the children find words for feelings such as happy, sad, angry or annoyed. The books are designed so that the teacher can repeat and rephrase what the children say,

reinforcing what was read from the text. This type of reading activity can certainly "elicit" children's ideas, allowing the teacher to direct children to come up with an appropriate solution to a conflict situation.

I think what is important is that children need to understand that aggressive behaviors are more than likely to occur (with conflict) and that they should not feel bad about themselves: but if they are having difficulty with a situation, the teacher (adult) is there to help. What the teacher wants to avoid is to lessen the child's confidence and self-esteem. It should be noted that harsh, punitive, measures for dealing with young children's aggressive behaviors has been found to increase more aggressive behaviors (Bandura, 1973).

Teachers might want to recommend the Crary book series to parents as an appropriate tool to use when reading with their children at home. As the teacher, you might want to wait until a parent approaches you first, to ask for advice as how to go about dealing with their four-year-old and the aggressive behaviors that arise out of conflict situations at home. Keep this in mind, because it was my experience that a parent was approached by the teacher concerning her child who had displayed unacceptable behavior in the class. The parent became insulted saying her child, "is not capable of such behavior..."

When you do recommend the Crary books to a parent, it is important that you stress that the child be allowed the opportunity to express his own thoughts and feelings,in particular, helping the child find the right words.

Children respond

I would like to share a reading activity I did with a small group of children at the book corner. The text I read was Sometimes I get Angry by Jane Werner-Watson,(1971). I chose to read this book following a confrontation between two children who began to hit each other because neither one of them would allow the other to finish his "story". Included in this small reading group were the two children involved in the conflict.

Prior to reading the story, I asked the children,"What does angry mean?. Some responses were: "It's when you get mad". It's when you scream". It's when it's loud and my ears hurt and I get mad". "Its when you kick blocks". All responses being accepted, I proceeded to tell the children that I would read them a story about a little boy about their age, who gets angry, why he gets angry and how he feels when he gets angry.

The book simply tells of a small child's day and the many obstacles he encounters and his reactions to these obstacles. Some of the little boy's actions are hostile,

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such as kicking and throwing. Some of his actions are harmless, such as shouting, just to hear oneself. As I read the story, some of the children interrupted to say things e.g. "My brother kicks my toys". "I don't want to listen" (when told to do something) or "I don't like it when Robert hits me". The children were able to personally relate to situations described in the story. Some remarks were: I don't like to share my car". I don't like no one to ride my bike". "I get mad". "I feel tired". "My eyes hurt and I cry". The children responded putting their feelings in their own words.

This story not only relates to how the small child acts inappropriately, but the author gives the other side of a situation; what adults sometimes do that cause children to kick, scream and say "no". For instance, The text gives the example of the adult rushing the child to do something, expecting too much of their small bodies, or saying that "you must share..." A repeated situation in my class is when a child is told he must hold (a sometime very unwilling) partners hand for line formation. The text speaks from a child's point of view., expressing just how he feels. *I like to do things I should, in my own sweet time, I want to be good. If grown-ups rush me or act like they're mad, I often change from good to bad.*

I took this opportunity to discuss with the children that sometimes parents, teachers and other children's words and actions make us feel like screaming and kicking and shouting. "no". I explained that sometimes we hurt people's feelings when we don't mean to. The children responded as follows: "It's like I feel mad when Brian pushes me". "I feel mad when someone kicks the blocks". "I feel mad when James takes my chair". The children responded by relating their own experiences. They were sharing ideas. The story ends with the little boy being comforted by his mother. I believe it is important that children know there will be times they will feel angry, but they should know that they could turn to a trusting adult (parent or teacher) for comfort and reassurance.

The Werner-Watson and Crary texts serve parents and teachers well to use for a shared-reading experience to stimulate easy and honest discussion of young children's conflict situations; situations that often result in aggressive behaviors. The use of these texts would certainly benefit the parent who looks for some guidance to understand the sometime "turbulent" emotional growth of their young children.

My own book review

Two texts that I found to be appropriate reading for an early childhood curriculum are The Boy Who Could Make His Mother Stop Yelling, Ilse Sondheimer, (1982) and I Was So Mad, Mercer Mayer, (1983). The latter book is a story about a young animal character who encounters many difficult obstacles in a day. Some of these obstacles are: He can't keep his frogs in the tub and he is not allowed to play with his sister's doll house and he is not allowed to tickle the pet goldfish. All this makes him very mad until he finds something he can do. The text contains very few words and the children will enjoy the colorful illustrations and the humor in the story. A four-year-old might just enjoy looking at the pictures and telling the story in his own words. This would work well as a small group reading activity or a one on one teacher/child reading activity. Either way, it is a good opportunity to invite discussion about feelings.

The Boy who Could Make His Mother Stop Yelling is a warm and emotional story about a young boy named Danny who suddenly finds himself competing with a new baby brother for their mother's attention. His mom, as Danny sees it, has turned into a very large person with a "lion's voice" as Danny puts it. While the four-year-old might not feel

the warmth of the story, it is a good book for discussing what it feels like to be "small and powerful" when the adult "mom" suddenly becomes "large and angry" all the time. This book is one of my personal favorites and it might come in handy as a "cuddle-up" reading activity.

It has been my experience that there are children who display aggressive behaviors by means of "bullying" and "bossiness". These behaviors don't necessarily lead the child to intentionally hurt other children. What this behavior can be interpreted as, is a healthy developmental stage through which children gain or strive for independence. Aggression becomes instrumental. The child fulfills a need to feel "powerful" a way to define "self"(Jersild, 1986; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates 1997).

I am "me"

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak, (1963) is a wonderful story about a boy named Max, who becomes "king of the wild things". This all takes place when Max is sent to his room because he was behaving like a "wild thing". The text contains very few words and the illustrations are wonderfully alive. Max is the star of the story and he has complete, but harmless control, over the "wild things".

This story could be used by the teacher who is dealing with lots of "super-hero" play in her class and needs a way

to channel all this energy towards a more productive activity for the children. After reading the story, the teacher could point out that Max is like a "super-hero" but he does not hurt anyone. Max wants to show us that he is strong and smart and he wants his friends to like him, (and they do!). At the end of the story, Max has had enough of being "king" and he happily retreats back to his room and a "still hot" meal. There is a sense of reassurance (adult presense) that is important as part of young children's development towards reaching independence (Turner, 1991; Kemple, 1991).

Margaret Wise Brown's book The Runaway Bunny, (1942,1972) has a similar theme; a show of independence; A young bunny is always telling his mother, "I will run away... and become a bird". To which the mother replies. "If you become a bird and fly away from me, I will be a tree that you can come home to". After proclaiming to become many things, the bunny decides that he is happy and safe just where he belongs. Most early childhood professionals and parents are probably familiar with this story.

It is to be recommended that the teacher could use this for group reading time. After reading the story, the teacher might want to begin a discussion by asking the children to contribute what it is they would become if they were the little bunny and ran away. How would they feel and what would they say? The teacher could extend the reading

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activity to an art activity, creating a class book. Each child could be asked to draw a picture of something they would become and dictate their own story. This is an excellent way to share with the parents, a classroom activity, by having the children take turns bringing the book home.

Criteria for book selection

In choosing the stories, one of the criteria was that the children could relate with the story characters; characters that deal with the same issues young children are dealing with in regards to aggressive behavior. Some of the stories were chosen because they present the child's point-of-view; what it's like to share, to take turns or just to want to do things by oneself. The story concepts were straight-forward, e.g. having to deal with a new sibling or several siblings or resisting adults' demands and requests.

Two of the books, The Boy Who Could Make His Mother Stop Yelling and The Runaway Bunny are personal favorites. It is my belief that these stories appeal to the child's "sense of self"; what it means to feel secure in a relation-ship with a significant adult, specifically, mommy. As part of the four-year-olds' emotional and social development, children must try to define and make sense of how they see themselves in relation to other peers and adults (Turner, 1991).

It should be noted that when choosing stories for young children, using animal-as-child characters avoids the problems of racial, socioeconomic and religious reprsentations. Animals are neither rich, poor, Hispanic, Caucasian, Black or Asian. The author can concentrate on the developmental stages of emotional, physical and personal development that appeal to all children, (Oppenheim, Brenner, & Boegehold, 1968, p. 64).

Rotten Ralph by Jack Gantos, (1976) is a very humorous story about a cat named Ralph, who misbehaves very badly. The illustrations are "vibrant" with color and they depict true facial expressions of Ralph as he experiences many emotions throughout the story.

Sheila Rae, the Brave by Kevin Henkes, (1987) is also a humorous story about a mouse, Sheila, who "dares" to do things that prove troublesome. Children will delight in the forbidden things Sheila, so bravely proclaims to do.

Prince Bertram, The Bad, by Arnold Lobel, (1963) is about a boy prince (not an animal character) who defies all his parents' wishes to behave in a proper manner. Bertram meets his "match" (in a very unlikely character) learns a valuable lesson of kindness and friendship. This is illustrated and written with humor; a great book for all children.

Noisy Nora, by Rosemary Wells,(1973), is a story about a mouse, Nora, who kicks, screams, slams doors, and knocks things over because she has to "wait" until her mother and father find time to spend with her because of two other siblings. The text contains few words, so it works well for the pre-school child and all children will enjoy the easy rhyming pattern. For the teacher who finds herself dealing with several young children, experiencing for the first time a new sibling at home, this and The Boy Who Could Make His Mother Stop Yelling, would be two excellent stories to include in the curriculum.

The Temper Tantrum Book, by Edna Mitchell, (1969), is a story about animal-as-children characters who stomp, squeal, howl, kick, flip and flop when they become angry at situations that are frustrating. Young children will certainly empathize with the animal characters. The author uses words and situations that young children could relate to, e.g. having to stay still while mommy is combing knots out of one's hair!

Franklin is Bossy, by Paulette Bourgeois, (1993), is another animal character story, a turtle. The text is a bit wordy, for the young child, however, it's a smart story about friendship and what it means to be a good sport, rather than always wanting to be the "boss".

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Working with young children, one knows that sometimes it is a good and (healthy) idea to let the children be "loud". The book N-O Spells NO, by Teddy Slater, (1993), is about a young girl named Kate who angrily yells "no" at anything her mom tries to get her to do. The text contains few words and the illustrations are "lively". It is suggested that the book be read with lots of expression and enthusiasm. The children will love participating by responding with the repeated phrase, "N-O spells no"! This is another personal favorite. It has been my own experience to watch the children squeal with delight as they anticipate saying the repeated phrase.

Don't forget the classics

There are two classic stories that deal with the theme of the "sense of power" over adults; getting away with something. The two books are, The Tale of Peter Rabbit, by Beatrix Potter, (1903, 1971) and The Three Billy Goats Gruff, which is an old Norwegian folk tale, so there are several versions available. These stories always prove to be good "attention holders" for all children. What child doesn't dream of "getting away" with doing something quite unacceptable. Well, almost getting away; Peter gets sent to bed without dinner. Reading books with this theme can open up discussion about how it is not always easy to behave the right way.

Last mention, Feelings, by Aliki, (1984), (though it might be a bit wordy for young children), with adult guidance, could be a good "sharing of feelings" book to read with a child who needs to be comforted and reassured about his own behaviors (emotions) be they good, bad or confusing. All children will delight in the colorful and humorous illustrations that fill each page. Stories should teach, but they should also encourage willing particiption and total enjoyment for children and adults, alike.

Discussion

Aggression is many things, It is mostly viewed as hostile, hurtful, behavior. For the four-year-old child, aggression is healthy and natural behavior, necessary for personal and social development. Aggression can be called, "emergence of self".

When a teacher offers developmentally appropppriate activities, e.g. reading children's books with conflict themes, children are allowed the opportunity to think through a situation, which in turn leads to meaningful discussion. Language skills are learned; language needed to be able to express one's feelings. When children have language, they are empowered with a tool that boosts confidence and self-esteem. Children learn to feel good about themselves and with adult guidance, will learn more acceptable behavior.

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